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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the distinction commonly drawn in freshman composition texts between fact and opinion is functionally worthless and presents students with a useless dichotomy. It is wrong to stress the difference between fact and opinion because it has led to the assumption that there is a style of writing appropriate to the presentation of fact and a different style suitable for other types of writing. The advantage of rejecting the conventional distinctions between fact and opinion in composition classes is that it forces the students to confront their own minds rather than hiding behind a facade of fact. Even in areas such as scientific research, historical investigation, and newspaper reporting, the ideal of objectivity is largely a myth. The use of fictive techniques in all kinds of writing should be encouraged. (TS)

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THE ART OF FACT AND THE ART OF FICTION

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Robert E. Lynch

(a paper delivered at the College Conference on Composition and Communication, March 15, 1975)

It had become almost a ritual in my freshman composition classes. I would give the topic for the next paper, explaining it as clearly and as thoroughly as I could; I would say when the paper was due and about how long it should be. Then I would ask if there were any questions. None at first, but then a hand would creep upward: "What do you <u>really</u> want us to do on this paper? I mean, do you want us to put down some facts . . ., or do you want, you know, just our opinions?" At such times I would get the feeling that I had been there before and had said before what I was about to say again: "Why do you say '<u>just</u> our opinions?' Of course I want your opinions, the opinions you've formed carefully after thinking the question through, opinions based on your reading, your experience, your imagination . . ." I would go on thus, all the time listening to myself explain for the thousandth time that even though their opinions are subjective by definition, they are nevertheless valuable and important, both to themselves and to me. Etc.

I have given some thought to that recurring scene, and I would like to share some ideas with you this morning, especially with those of you who have found yourselves playing that scene as often as I have.

I suggest that the distinction commonly drawn in freshman composition texts between fact and opinion is functionally worthless, that it presents our students with a comfortable but entirely theoretical dichotomy. I will not go so far as to deny that a distinction can be drawn between fact and opinion in the abstract, but I do maintain that the process of searching

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for, evaluating and presenting those facts is necessarily such a highly subjective procedure that the distinction between facts and non-facts has no relevance to the teaching of composition. It is with that last step, the presentation of factual material, that we are most concerned with here. We have been wrong, I think, to stress the difference between fact and opinion because it has led to the assumption that there is a style of writing appropriate to the presentation of fact and another, wholly different style suitable for everything else—and we can include in that "everything else" fiction as well as opinion. I am proposing that in our composition classes we underplay, if not reject entirely, the conventional distinctions between fact and opinion, and the exclusive writing style each supposedly calls for.

The most important advantage to this approach is that it forces the student to confront his own mind and make it, in the official slogan of our conference, his "supreme resource," rather than to allow him to hide behind a facade of fact. The writer who assumes the posture of the methodical scientist, the disinterested historian or the objective reporter is to an extent submerging his own identity, or pretending to, and this is not the self-image we should be inspiring in our students, especially the freshmen who by their very position as <u>arrivistes</u> in college tend to wonder about who they are and where they fit into this new world they have entered. Even in those areas I mentioned—scientific research, historical investigation, newspaper reporting—the ideal of objectivity is largely a myth. The answers reporters get from witnesses at a news event, those historians get from the documents of a time past, or those scientists get from nature itself are entirely dependent upon the questions they choose to ask, that is, on their own preconceptions of what they <u>want</u> to know. ¶Let me first cite some examples in the field of scientific research, for no endeavor has the aura of absolute objectivity more pronounced than the processes we call the scientific method. But even here the personal vision of the researcher is an essential factor in that

which he is researching. Observing the motion of the pendulum, Aristotle saw confirmation of his thesis that bodies tend to fall to their natural resting places; looking at the same motion, Galileo saw evidence of his idea of inertia, perceiving the weight's tendence to move along its arc past the nadir rather than its eventual fall to stillness. Einstein once said that a theory in physics is not determined by the facts of nature but is instead a free invention of the human mind. Physicist Niels Bohr took that idea a bit further and related it directly to the prose in which modern physicists describe their work. "When it comes to atoms," Bohr said, "language can be used only as in poetry. The poet too is not nearly so concerned with describing facts as with creating images."[1] The picture of the atom we carry in our minds, then, is the product of poetic vision. The smallest particle of matter resembles the solar system itself; this is a world picture I find as attractive as the Ptolemaic cosmography seemed to the medievals.

The study of history too is a discipline in which objectivity is often emphasized, but many historians concede that the all-praised neutrality is largely allusory. Charles Woolsey Cole, for instance, has defined a "historical fact" as "what the historian thinks of what someone else thinks he saw or said or did or heard. . . . Historical fact, when isolated, has little meaning. It has to be tied to other facts to bring out its importance. When, however, it comes to a question of selecting, relating and ordering facts," Cole admits, "history becomes essentially subjective."[2] The influence of Croce and Collingwood on historiography has encouraged some historians to break free from the bonds of fact and allow themselves the liberty to emulate the vigorous style of some early great historians, like Gibbon, Orosius and Herodotus (the last significantly nicknamed both the Father of History and the Father of Lies); none of them felt bound to erect any facade of objectivity around their work. Allow me to quote from the first lines of one of the most popular texts in American History courses, Morison and Commager's Growth of the American Republic. The first edition, which

appeared in 1930, began with a rather stuffy account of the roots of American history going deeply into colonial and European experience. Later editions, however, start the story at a much earlier time and in a quite different style. Here is how that text describes the true discovery of America:

> One summer day over twenty-five thousand and less than forty thousand years ago, a tribe of Mongolian savages stood on lofty Cape Dejneva, the easternmost promontory of Siberia, about thirty miles south of the Arctic Circle. They or their parents had abandoned their old home in what is now the Gobi Desert, because that area was beginning to dry up. They had a long, hard trek of at least three thousand miles, living off the country and fighting the natives all along the way for several years. Perhaps only the magic of their medicine man, his promise of a new world toward the rising sun, had kept them going. Food was scarce, the latest enemy to resent their intrusion followed hard at their heels, and their skin garments were in tatters; in fact they were a tough-looking lot, even according to Siberian standards of that very unrefined era. Looking southeastward over Bering Strait, our hard-pressed savages saw clearly, only twenty-three miles away, a dome-shaped island over seventeen hundred feet high rising above the sea. They had no experience in navigation, but something had to be done quickly. So, either by fastening together whatever logs and driftwood they could procure, or (more likely) by stealing native kayaks, they ferried themselves over to Big Diomede Island, as we call it, and shook off their pursuers. . . . Our pilgrims so fell in love with this new country that they completely forgot about the old.[3]

Now we are accustomed to seeing historians shaping their material to fit the political biases of their own age, but more important, I think, are the embellishments made in the interests of good storytelling. Our ill-clad, ill-fed tribe of migrants narrowly escaping the clutches of their pursuers that summer day and earning a new land for their heroic efforts—even with all the disconcerting "factual" material thrown in (the height of Big Diomede Island!), this is clearly the stuff of fiction.

Scientific research, historical writing, newspaper reporting—let me give you one brief example of the use of fictive techniques in that last category, a news item which appeared only last week. First here is the story as the wire service

carried it:

> SALISBURY, Mass. (AP) Bird watchers from several states have flocked to the mouth of the Merrimack River here to see a bird rarely spotted in North America, the Ross's Gull.
>
> The bird was first spotted on Sunday and the word spread so fast among bird enthusiasts that more than 50 persons were on hand to look for it at dawn the next day, authorities said.

That Associated Press account has all those elements of style taught in journalism school. But listen to how much more imaginatively the story was presented when it appeared on page one of The New York Times:

> SALISBURY, Mass., March 3—Telephones rang. The word was passed. Up and down the East Coast, dedicated men and women rose in the middle of the night, shouldered their equipment and drove hours through the darkness to take up their cold watches along the marshes and beaches here where the Merrimack River flows into the Atlantic.
>
> A Ross's Gull had been seen.
>
> "This is the birding event of the century," said a man who saw the gull yesterday.

I wonder if someone did make that definitive statement within earshot of the Times reporter. I think it more likely that he simply made it up to embellish the dull AP account, imagining those dedicated ornithologists on their nocturnal mission. Is the story any less valid if he did make up those details?

This use of fictive techniques, even in scientific writing, history texts and newspaper reporting, is to be encouraged. The objective, factual style of writing it replaces had been partly responsible for the stilted prose we have seen so much of in our students' writing: those tedious third person constructions, those convoluted passive voice sentences.

Just as interesting as these examples of factual material presented in the garb of fiction are examples of fiction or drama which rely on devices normally associated with non-fiction writing. I think of all the scholarly paraphenalia in Nabakov's Pale Fire or the current vogue of historical plays which have come to be called "documentary drama." In Mary Stuart Schiller

made no pretense toward objectivity, and so he felt free to build his play around a confrontation between Mary and Queen Elizabeth which historians tell us never took place. But notice how differently the modern documentary dramatist presents his material. Hochhuth on Pope Pius, Kipphardt on J. Robert Oppenheimer, Freed on the Rosenbergs—each playwright proclaims his material a "reconstruction" of events. In Inquest, Donald Freed's play asserting the innocence of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, panels are placed around the theater advising us in the audience: "Every word you hear on this stage is a documented quotation." We feel a bit disoriented reading that, and when the play begins with the court clerk calling upon all present to rise and to recite the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag, we wonder if we are supposed to do so as well as those on the stage. The ultimate gesture in pretending that we are seeing an actual event and not a play is the sign above the stage: "There will be no curtain calls." This apparent rejection of fundamental theatrical convention is, of course, the most theatrical device of all.[5]

The blurring of the distinction between fact and fiction can be a good thing if only because it forces us to re-evaluate the validity of conventional categories. But it can do more. It can help us to teach composition in that it stresses the use of imagination in all kinds of writing.

This is the first semester I have tried working along these lines. I have had the class writing factual-sounding papers on the most fantastic things they could imagine. (Orson Welles showed us in 1938 how easy it is to make the unimaginable seem real by clothing it in a fact-oriented medium.) I have asked them to tell me everything important about themselves as human beings, but to use only facts in their report. After trying to do so, all agreed that they could present nothing of themselves by reciting the facts of their lives. (And if we cannot give any accurate image of who we are if forced to stick to facts, how can a historian tell us anything vital about Woodrow Wilson, or Henry the Eighth, or Julius Caesar, unless

he makes free use of imaginative speculation?) After breaking down their assumption that the accumulation of facts is the end of research, of education, of the truth-seeking process, I try to build up their regard for their opinions, their imagination, and the various forms of writing they produce.

After a few semesters of all this, I will have some idea of how successful I have been. One positive effect I have already noticed, one I had not anticipated, is that students seem less resentful at having their papers evaluated. With the dichotomy of fact versus opinion, it seems, they had felt themselves insulated from honest criticism. For if they recorded verifiable facts, how could the teacher object? Facts are facts, or so they thought. But if on the other hand they had written their opinions, then who could say they were wrong? "You have your opinion, I have mine," they would protest. "Who is to say which of us is right or wrong?" Despite the teacher's argument that an opinion is worthwhile in proportion to the amount and quality of thinking that went into its formulation, still the student reacted as if the classroom authority was simply exercising his divine right to assert the correctness of his opinion. I have had far less resentment of that kind so far this term.

One last advantage is that so far at least, no one has asked what I really want on the next paper, the FACTS or merely some opinions.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Bohr is thus quoted by Jacob Bronowski in The Ascent of Man (Boston: Little-Brown, 1973), p. 340. The Einstein idea is reaffirmed by J. Robert Oppenheimer, "On Science and Culture," Encounter, 19 (October, 1962), 8.

[2] The Cole article, "The Relativity of History," which appeared first in Political Science Quarterly (June, 1933) has been excerpted by Walker Gibson for Seeing and Writing (New York: David Mc Kay, 1974), pp. 152-56.

[3] Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry Steele Commager, The Growth of the American Republic, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1950), pp. 1-2.

[4] John Kifner, "A Rare Bird in Massachusetts," The New York Times, March 4, 1975, p. 1. The Associated Press story was carried in a number of newspapers on March 4 or March 5.

[5] Walter Kerr raised these and other questions about the historicity of Inquest in his review in the Arts and Leisure Section of The New York Times, Sunday, May 3, 1970, p. 3.